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NSC FOR APDNSA JOHN BRENNAN AND DENISE MORAGA
DEPT FOR NEA/ARP AMACDONALD

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KDRG](#) [PINS](#) [SA](#) [YM](#)
SUBJECT: BRENNAN-SALEH MEETING SEP 6, 2009

REF: SANAA 01549

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b),
(c), and (d).

11. (S/NF) SUMMARY. In a September 6 meeting with Deputy National Security Advisor John Brennan, President Saleh pledged unfettered access to Yemen's national territory for U.S. counterterrorism operations, suggesting that in the process, the USG assumed responsibility for the success - or failure - of efforts to neutralize AQAP in Yemen. Saleh expressed dissatisfaction with the USG's current level of aid for CT and security operations and insisted the ROYG began its war against the al-Houthi rebellion in northern Yemen on behalf of the U.S. Saleh stated his preference for Saudi Arabia over Jordan as a potential rehabilitation site for Guantanamo detainees of Yemeni origin, but claimed the ROYG was willing and able to accept them in Yemeni prisons. In a one-on-one that followed, Brennan extended an invitation to Saleh to visit President Obama at the White House on October 16. END SUMMARY.

"OPEN LAND, AIR, AND SEA" FOR U.S. STRIKES AGAINST AQAP

12. (S/NF) In a September 6 meeting with Deputy National Security Advisor John Brennan, President Saleh insisted that Yemen's national territory is available for unilateral CT operations by the U.S. Dissatisfied with current levels of USG funding and military training provided to the ROYG's CT forces, Saleh asserted that the USG has produced "only words, but no solutions" to the terrorism issue in Yemen. Saleh repeatedly requested more funds and equipment to fight al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), while at the same time placing responsibility for any future AQAP attacks on the shoulders of the USG now that it enjoys unfettered access to Yemeni airspace, coastal waters and land. (NOTE. The USG has been actively engaged since 2001 in training elements of Yemen's CT forces, including the Counter-Terrorism Unit (CTU), the Yemen Special Operations Force (YSOF), the Presidential Guard, the Yemeni Border Troops, Yemen Air Force (YAF), and the Yemen Coast Guard (YCG). The USG has expended over \$115 million equipping CT forces since FY02. In 2009 alone, U.S. teams have instructed Yemeni CT forces in training valued at \$5 million. END NOTE.)

13. (S/NF) While Saleh offered assurances that the ROYG is "determined to continue the war against al-Qaeda because they're targeting U.S. and Yemeni interests," he continued to link increased U.S. access to AQAP targets with full responsibility for achieving CT goals. Highlighting the potential for a future AQAP attack on the U.S. Embassy or other Western targets, Saleh said, "I have given you an open

door on terrorism, so I am not responsible."

THE SA'ADA WAR: "THE HOUTHIS ARE YOUR ENEMIES TOO"

14. (S/NF) President Saleh expressed his frustration with the USG refusal to view the Sa'ada war against the al-Houthis in the north in the same light as the fight against AQAP. Claiming a need for increased aid and support, Saleh asserted that "this war we're launching is a war on behalf of the U.S....the Houthis are your enemies too," citing videos of al-Houthi followers chanting, "Death to Israel, death to America." (NOTE: The Houthis have not attacked U.S. interests or personnel in the six rounds of fighting between the ROYG and the Houthis that began in 2004. END NOTE.) The USG's failure to view the Houthis as terrorists and equip ROYG forces to fight them in Sa'ada undermines the USG's claims of friendship and cooperation, according to Saleh. Commenting on the status of ROYG forces in Sa'ada, Saleh said, "we are suffering a lot of casualties and loss of material." Renewing his requests for armored personnel vehicles, aircraft, and medical evacuation vehicles, Saleh echoed his criticism of U.S. efforts. "We need deeds, not only words," he said. Brennan responded that the USG is prohibited by law from providing military support to the ROYG to be used against the Houthis since the USG considers the group a domestic insurgency.

15. (S/NF) Restating claims of Iranian support to the Houthi movement, ROYG officials present said they had provided files supporting an Iranian-Houthi connection to USG officials and would provide more if necessary. (NOTE. The Ambassador acknowledged receiving a file that was reviewed here and in Washington; however, no conclusive evidence of an Iranian-Houthi link has been made from these or other records. Brennan said that he would request a fresh scrub of all available intelligence to see if it turned up any evidence of Iranian involvement. END NOTE.) Saleh said, "Iran is trying to settle old scores against the U.S. by ruining relations between Yemen and GCC countries and the U.S." He also made a tangential reference to Hezbollah, claiming the organization's influence in the region also rendered the ROYG-Houthi war a fight on behalf of the U.S. Referencing the high poverty rate and illicit arms flows into both Yemen and Somalia, Saleh concluded by saying, "If you don't help, this country will become worse than Somalia."

MUDDLED MESSAGES ON GUANTANAMO DETAINEES

16. (S/NF) Saleh expressed his preference for the existing Saudi Arabia option as a potential site for rehabilitating Guantanamo detainees of Yemeni origin over a proposed Jordanian option, citing closer familial ties and cultural bonds in Saudi Arabia as mechanisms for more effective treatment. Saleh commented that he thought the Jordanians were &too poor8 to support a rehabilitation program, but did not dismiss Jordan as an option. However, he signaled that rehabilitation is not his concern, but rather "the U.S.'s problem" as he is ready and willing to accept all Yemeni detainees into the Yemeni prison system. (COMMENT. Saleh would, in our judgment, be unable to hold returning detainees in jail for any more than a matter of weeks before public pressure) or the courts) forced their release. END COMMENT.) Saleh urged the USG to design and implement a rehabilitation and education program for the detainees and to build a rehabilitation center in Yemen, but reiterated that the U.S. would have to fund these projects, repeatedly asking, "How many dollars is the U.S. going to bring?" However, when Brennan offered \$500,000 as an initial investment currently available for the crafting of a rehabilitation program, Saleh dismissed the offer as insufficient. Saleh also assured Brennan that he was committed to "freeing the innocent people after a complete and total rehabilitation," suggesting a lack of clarity on his own policy and on the status of Guantanamo detainees in the ROYG legal system.

17. (S/NF) Saleh welcomed the letter from President Obama that Brennan hand-carried, and expressed appreciation for U.S. concern over the stability and economic hardships facing the country. He agreed to move forward with the 10-point plan outlining necessary economic reforms (reftel) but did not provide details regarding dates or implementation goals. Responding to Brennan's concerns that economic and other assistance might be diverted through corrupt officials to other purposes, Saleh urged the U.S. to donate supplies and hardware rather than liquid funds in order to curb corruption's reach. Saleh also told US officials that they could have full access to financial records to ensure proper usage of donor funding. (COMMENT. Saleh's preference for infrastructure and equipment over cash displays a lack of confidence in his own regime's ability to handle liquid assets and hardly provides a viable solution for stemming the curb of corruption in the long run. END COMMENT.)

VISIT TO WASHINGTON & OTHER ISSUES

18. (S/NF) Saleh again asked to visit the U.S., arguing that it was necessary to resolve issues regarding the Guantanamo detainees and increased military assistance. "We see this visit as very important to reach mutual understanding and so that you understand our requests and demands." Brennan undertook to look into Saleh's claims of "promised" military equipment that has not been delivered. In a one-on-one session that followed the formal meeting, Brennan extended an invitation to Saleh to meet President Obama at the White House on October 6. Saleh also stated that there would be no more delays in the U.S. Embassy's request to purchase lands for the building of more secure housing facilities and that the Shari'a Council would approve the transfer of the lands from waqf (or publicly held) status to free-hold status.

COMMENT

19. (S/NF) COMMENT. Saleh was in vintage form during the two hours he spent with DNSA Brennan, at times disdainful and dismissive and at others, conciliatory and congenial. One might easily conclude that his repeated assertion that Yemen's national territory is open to the US to conduct operations against AQAP reflects his interest in outsourcing the CT effort in Yemen to the USG, especially in view of his somewhat ominous claim that, should AQAP attacks occur in the future, they will be the result of the U.S. having failed to do enough to put the organization out of business. Additionally, a concerted USG anti-terrorism campaign in Yemen will free Saleh to continue to devote his limited security assets to the ongoing war against Houthi rebels in Sa'ada. The net effect, and one we strongly suspect Saleh has calculated, of both the American and ROYG "iron fist" unleashed at the same time in Yemen will be a clear message to the southern movement or any other party interested in generating political unrest in the country that a similar fate awaits them.

110. (S/NF) COMMENT CONTINUED. Not surprisingly, Saleh was far less animated when Brennan attempted to focus his attention on the need for immediate action to relieve Yemen's deteriorating socio-economic situation, largely limiting his response to a pitch that the USG persuade recalcitrant donors to speed up and increase their assistance to Yemen. After stating petulantly in the group session that he was no longer interested in an invitation to the White House, telling Brennan that "my relationship with you is sufficient," Saleh's mood changed noticeably for the better when the invitation was extended, and he had captured the prize he has been chasing after for months. END COMMENT.

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